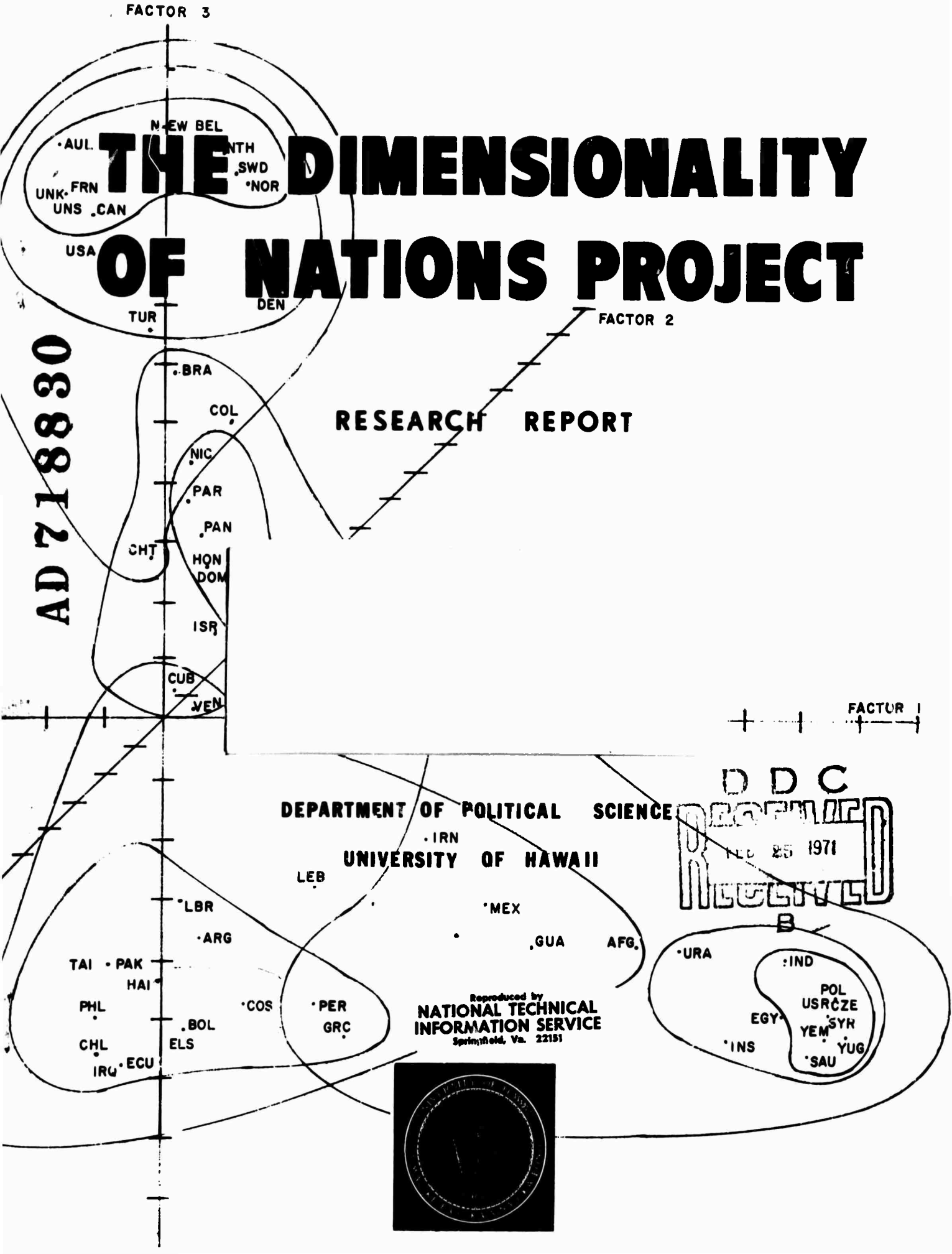

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The Dimensionality of Nations Project
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RESEARCH REPORT NO. 51

POLICY ANALYSIS FOR ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

George Kent

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The Dimensionality of Nations Project
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POLICY ANALYSIS FOR ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

ABSTRACT

Political studies have had little contribution to make to the management of real political problems, largely because they have been devoted more to the end of increasing understanding than to the end of formulating concrete recommendations for action. The two are not the same. At some stages, the continued pursuit of deeper understanding may distract the analyst from the work of formulating concrete action recommendations. Carefully performed, explicit policy analyses designed to develop recommendations for action dealing with real political problems can be legitimate scholarly endeavors. Methodologies and guiding principles for the conduct of such studies can be formulated, just as they have been for the conduct of empirical research. More action-oriented policy analyses need to be done, and more effort should be devoted to cultivating the methods for doing them.

POLICY ANALYSIS FOR ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS[1]

George Kent
University of Hawaii

Introduction

Political scientists have discovered that most of their work really does not contribute very much to dealing with the great or even the small political problems of our age. Of course, some are unconcerned, arguing that political scientists should be pure seekers of knowledge, aloof from the problems of the day. While allowing that it might be appropriate for some of their number to stand apart in this way, other political scientists have become uneasy with their apparent impotence. Troubled, they ask what they might do, professionally, to help grapple with the issues.

Their responses have varied widely. In the 1950s, a group of eminent scholars, facing what they saw as the "world revolution" of their time, answered the challenge by launching a series of studies on political elites and another on the nature of political symbols.[2] Rather than continuing the traditional emphasis on political institutions, some political scientists began to concentrate their studies on the decision-making process.[3] To do what they could to "help in dealing with the great public

[1]This study was prepared in connection with the Dimensionality of Nations Project, supported by the Advanced Research Projects Agency, ARPA Order No. 1063, and monitored by the Office of Naval Research, Contract No. N00014-67-A-0387-0003.

[2]Harold D. Lasswell, The World Revolution of Our Time: A Framework for Basic Policy Research, Stanford: Hoover Institute Studies, Stanford University Press, 1951. One of the major works to emerge from this effort, Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell (eds.), The Policy Sciences, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1951, is devoted entirely to research methodologies.

[3]Cf. Edward V. Schneier (ed.), Policy-Making in American Government, New York: Basic Books, 1969, p. ix et passim.

problems and issues of our time," other were concerned that "at least since 1945 most American political scientists have focused their professional attention mainly on the processes by which public policies are made and have shown relatively little concern with their contents."[4] The decade of the 1970s was ushered in with the Caucus for a New Political Science calling for studies more attuned to real, rather than academic, political questions, and with the new President of the American Political Science Association expressing support of their views.[5]

Asking only for reallocations of attention within familiar terrain, however, these were not wholly new departures. The call for a shift to more applied research, for example, has been commonly understood to mean that more studies should examine the effects of variables within the control of political decision-makers. It was expected that the techniques and forms by which these studies were to be conducted would fit into the well-tested molds. The demands for relevance called for research asking new questions, and for efforts at achieving understanding from angles that may not have been tried before. Where there have been calls for really new departures, they have not been heard that way.

For the most part, it is still research and still a search for understanding that is expected. Political scientists seem hardly aware that these particular definitions of their task have been constraining,

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[4]Austin Ranney, "The Study of Policy Content: A Framework for Choice," in Austin Ranney (ed.), Political Science and Public Policy, Chicago: Markham, 1968, p. 3.

[5]David Easton, "The New Revolution in Political Science," American Political Science Review, Vol. LXIII, No. 4 (December 1969), pp. 1051-1061.

that there are alternatives, other things one might do besides research, and even other ends to be sought besides understanding. The term political science is constraining, as is the term peace research, unless of course these terms are understood in a very broad sense. Studies which are not primarily devoted to research and are not fully scientific may nevertheless be legitimate, and even scholarly, and if they are, they should be recognized as such by the political studies profession.

One of the most seriously retarded kinds of studies are those explicitly designed to produce sound recommendations for action dealing with concrete problems, studies described here as policy analyses. Of course the notion that political scientists should be concerned with developing recommendations is very old, not very new. Froman describes the traditional, normative studies of public policy in this way:

> These studies attempt to analyze, usually in a critical fashion, a particular public policy (agriculture, labor, education, unemployment, etc.), and generally will also suggest either reforms in the existing policy or a new type of policy altogether. For example, there are numerous studies of our foreign aid program which describe in detail how it has failed in one way or another to live up to certain standards. These reports are accompanied by general or specific recommendations on how the program can be "improved."
>
> Studies of this kind have now fallen into disrepute as being "value-laden" and lacking in scientific interest. Much of the dissatisfaction revolves around the point that such studies are argumentative and sometimes rhetorical, using data to score policy points rather than scientific ones.[6]

As a result, normative studies have been shunned. In his anthology on policy studies, Sharkansky favors "a primary concern with explanation rather than prescription" and is pleased that "the focus on explanation

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[6]Lewis A. Froman, Jr., "The Categorization of Policy Contents," in Ranney (ed.), Political Science and Public Policy, op. cit., p. 42.

instead of prescription allows political scientists with different preferences to cooperate on common projects."[7]

Surely the observation that normative studies have been done poorly should lead to their refinement, not to their abandonment. They have been abandoned. The art is now retarded more out of neglect than because of failures in serious attempts at it, and it has been neglected largely because it has not been recognized as a fully legitimate scholarly medium. The propriety and value of doing policy analyses will not be argued here; both are simply assumed. The purpose of this essay is to promote the undertaking of policy analyses, and to encourage the development of its methodology. The alternative to "objective, value-free" research is not solely the pressing of one's personal political views. What is new in this attempt at the revival of prescriptive studies is its call for a new kind of explicit, systematic style which will help political scientists with differences to deal with those differences.[8]

The Character of Policy Analyses

Policy analysis is understood here to mean that kind of systematic, disciplined, analytical, scholarly, creative study whose primary motivation is to produce well-supported recommendations for action dealing with concrete political problems. The question posed might be "How should the United

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[7] Ira Sharkansky (ed.), Policy Analysis in Political Science, Chicago: Markham, 1970, p. 2.

[8] Among the few attempts at prescribing guidelines for policy analyses are David Braybrooke and Charles E. Lindblom, A Strategy of Decision: Policy Evaluation as a Social Process, New York: Free Press, 1963; and Yehezkel Dror, Public Policymaking Reexamined, San Francisco: Chandler, 1968. For reviews and rejoinders on Dror, see Ira Sharkansky and Randall Ripley in American Political Science Review, Vol. LXIII, No. 3 (September 1969), pp. 915-921; Dror in American Political Review, Vol. LXIV, No. 1 (March 1970), pp. 185-186; Michael J. Shapiro in Transaction, Vol. VII, No. 12 (October 1970), pp. 55-57.

States respond to the shooting down of American reconnaissance aircraft over North Vietnam?" or "What should Mothers for Peace do to protest the Indochina war?" or "How should Mothers for Peace organize its letter-writing campaign in opposition to the Indochina war?" or "What should the government of Cuba do if it wished to have the United States leave its bases at Guantanamo?" or "What should the Vatican do in relation to the Middle East conflict." The problems can be real or hypothetical, immediate or distant, specific or general, and the analyses can be addressed to any political decision-maker and can be framed in reference to any set of political values. In every case, policy analyses respond to the question, what should be done?

By the definition used here, policy analyses are analytical studies which always refer to concrete political problems and always conclude with concrete recommendations for action. There are many kinds of policy-oriented studies which are relevant to and may contribute to the goals of policy analysis, but which must not be mistaken for policy analyses. For example, studies of the contents or sources of policies that have been formed in the past by others, or studies which describe or explain policy-making institutions or procedures are not policy analyses in the meaning used here. The reference here is not specifically to formal theories of decision-making, or to large-scale management systems, or to studies of the bureaucratic politics of implementing decisions -- although all of these may of course be useful to the policy analyst.

In asking what should be done, rather than what is the case, policy analysis becomes something other than a variation of empirical research. Of course the revelation of facts or the validation of empirical generalizations does have an important role to play in policy analysis. Such research is essential at the outset to establish a clear understanding of the political problem under study, and to reveal feasible courses of action. The task of

evaluation may raise certain empirical questions because one alternative would be preferred if one thing were the case and another would be preferred if another situation prevailed. These questions of fact on which the choice is found to depend might be susceptible to empirical research. It should be appreciated, however, that research designed to support policy studies must be preceded by some tentative policy analytical work to determine which research questions matter, since many of the empirical questions which might be raised about a political problem are quite irrelevant to the work of the policy analyst.

Unlike most empirical research studies, policy analyses do not just hint at action recommendations and they do not pretend that the identification of wise actions is implicit, but somehow self-evident, in collections of validated empirical propositions.

Not every study which produces explicit recommendations qualifies as a policy analysis. A good policy analysis is to the usual essay arguing for certain actions as a sound research study is to a journalistic report. The quality of a policy analysis study rests not only in the statement of its final recommendations, but also in the support that is developed for those recommendations, just as the quality of a piece of research lies not only in the statement of its findings but also in the nature of their validation.

The purpose of a policy analysis study is to form decisions in problematic situations, and not to defend decisions that have already been made. Once the analyst is confident that he knows what should be done, there is no call for policy analysis at all. If the form is used to press particular political views, to sanctify decisions and to persuade others of their virtue, it is abused.

One can do many different kinds of studies about the work of policy analysis, but these are not examples of policy analysis.

The most needed studies about policy analysis are those which will help to guide the steps to be taken between the initial identification of the political problem of interest and the final report of well-supported recommendations for action. As in the case of empirical research, it is not obvious how policy analyses should be conducted. The art needs a methodology to help its practitioners to guard against error, and to encourage attempts by new practitioners.

Methodology of Policy Analysis

Austin Ranney apparently does not take himself very seriously when he suggests that

> . . . political science may develop, for example, a reliable and valid system for calculating political costs and benefits; an agreed and operationalized optimizing criterion of "gross political product"; and/or an extension of ends-means analysis to specify the interrelations and priorities of instrumental values. If it does, political scientists' professional knowledge and skills will become visibly useful in the identification, comparison, and evaluation of competing policy proposals; and, inevitably, policy-makers will call on us extensively for advice and quite possibly even pay it serious attention.[9]

Political scientists may not be able to provide formulas for finding exact answers, but they can at least provide guidance for posing the right questions. The function of a methodology is, in part, to help find the questions. It decomposes the larger "what should be done?" question into a series of smaller, easier-to-answer questions. Although there are as yet

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[9]Ranney, op. cit., p. 18.

no well developed models for doing policy analytic work, it is possible to point to the need and to point to directions which might be taken to fulfill this need. Whatever the likelihood of success, the endeavor seems eminently worthwhile.

Methodologies of the kind sought here have been developed to a highly sophisticated level in other fields, but their carry-over to political problems is limited. For example, the techniques developed for the management of large enterprises, such as planning-programming-budgeting, or PERT, are not helpful for dealing with individual problematic policy questions.[10] Formal decision theories like those on decision-making under uncertainty or on game theory can be understood as prescriptive, but they are difficult to use because of the practical impossibility of expressing real political problems in the terms required by these theories.[11] Instances may be found in which these techniques have been used, but this does not falsify the observation that the methods are not generally applicable. Similarly, the techniques of operations research are not of much use, primarily because of the highly

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[10]Cf. Fremont J. Lyden and Ernest G. Miller (eds.), Planning Programming Budgeting: A Systems Approach to Management, Chicago: Markham, 1967; Frederick C. Mosher and John E. Harr, Programming Systems and Foreign Affairs Leadership: An Attempted Innovation, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970; Aaron Wildavsky, "The Political Economy of Efficiency: Cost-Benefit Analysis, Systems, Analysis, and Program Budgeting," in Ranney (ed.), Political Science and Public Policy, op. cit., pp. 55-82; Aaron Wildavsky, "Rescuing Policy Analysis From PPBS," Public Administration Review, Vol. XXIX, No. 2 (March/April 1969). This last article by Wildavsky is included among the committee prints circulated in connection with hearings on PPBS held in the late 1960s before the Subcommittee on National Security and International Operations.

[11]Cf. R. Duncan Luce and Howard Raiffa, Games and Decisions: Introduction and Critical Survey, New York: Wiley, 1957; Howard Raiffa, Decision Analysis: Introductory Lectures on Choices Under Uncertainty, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1968; Arnold Kaufman, The Science of Decision-Making: An Introduction to Praxeology, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968; Ward Edwards and Amos Tversky (eds.), Decision Making, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967.

multidimensional nature of most political problems.[12] Operations research techniques rely on the possibility of specifying trade-offs among small numbers of variables and on the use of relatively simple optimization techniques. If real political problems could be clarified sufficiently to make these analytic techniques usable, that clarification would itself be likely to make the wise choices evident, and thus render the use of the elaborate computations unnecessary. Although these methods may not be directly applicable, they should be studied because of the insights they can provide in their suggestions of ways of thinking about political policy questions.[13]

These observations on the limited usefulness of some of the more highly developed decision-making systems and models are not intended as arguments against being analytical. The beginning of a methodology about to be suggested here is supposed to be the beginning of an analytical scheme. The argument here is that, where rigorous models have failed to adequately meet real political problems, the response to that tension has frequently been to abandon the real problems in favor of the advancement of rigorous theory in restricted domains. Many "demonstrations" of the application of sophisticated techniques to real political problems have resulted from having analysts, committed to particular techniques, searching out problems to which their techniques might be applied. Political problems have been simplified and trivialized until they are adapted to the methods that are available. In other words, the common practice has been to sacrifice reality for rigor,

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[12] Cf. Charles J. Hitch and Roland N. McKean, The Economics of Defense in the Nuclear Age, New York: Atheneum, 1967; Edward S. Quade (ed.), Analysis for Military Decisions, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967.

[13] Cf. Kenneth Boulding, Conflict and Defense: A General Theory, New York: Harper, 1962; Anatol Rapoport, Strategy and Conscience, New York: Harper, 1964; Thomas C. Schelling, The Strategy of Conflict, New York: Oxford University Press, 1963.

a practice which tends to evade some of the most difficult phases of the analysis of real political problems. A major purpose of this essay is to suggest the possibility of reversing these priorities by beginning with a firm commitment to real political problems, and then asking what tools, no matter how rigorous, might be developed to meet those problems.

A methodology for policy analysis can be developed by beginning with obvious-sounding prescriptions like: 1. list the alternatives; 2. select the best alternative. When it is discovered that it is really not obvious how each of these tasks should be performed, and that other steps need to be taken, the list can be modified accordingly, until it is elaborated to the extent that it becomes truly useful. The evolution of guidelines can be advanced simply by thinking vicariously about how the work of policy analysis might proceed, but then it must be tried. When it is found that it really does not and should not proceed in the way that was anticipated, the guidelines can be revised in the light of that new, practical experience. The following list, for example, might provide a good starting point for close critical review.

STEPS IN POLICY ANALYSIS

1. Identify (i.e., name) the political problem of interest.

2. Identify the "client," the actor to whom recommendations are to be addressed.

3. Describe the problem in detail, including its history, the identity of the major parties to the problem, their expressed and apparent values in relation to the problem, etc.

4. Review previous suggestions for dealing with the problem.

5. Review past experiences with similar problems.

6. Draw up a list naming the different kinds of things the client actor might do which would bear some relationship to the problem, without concern for detail, and without concern

for the wisdom of taking the actions. This might be described as a list of feasible actions.

7. On the basis of a tentative, essentially intuitive evaluation, select from the list of feasible actions that subset which is judged to be worthy of further investigation. In doubtful cases, retain the action possibility for further examination. This list, which can be described as the list of plausible actions, should be kept open for later additions, as new possibilities occur to the analyst.

8. Describe the actions named in the list of plausible actions in greater detail, including suggested modes of implementation. This produces a list of candidate action recommendations.

9. Describe the variety of possible consequences which can be anticipated for each of these actions, including the possible responses of the parties who would be affected by the action.

10. Estimate the relative probability with which each of these actions is likely to lead to each of these possible consequences.

11. Evaluate the qualities of the different anticipated possible consequences, determining at least roughly which would be desirable and which would be undesirable consequences.

12. Reject those action possibilities which appear to have no substantial probability of producing relatively good consequences.

13. Reformulate the remaining list of plausible actions into sets of mutually exclusive alternatives to show where choices need to be made.

14. Where the choices among these well-specified alternatives are not difficult to make, state the resulting action recommendations and the reasons for their selection.

15. Where the choices among alternative action recommendations are difficult to make, describe the character of the actions in greater detail (and possibly modify them), and specify criteria for chosing among them, to the extent necessary to make choices. State the resulting recommendations and the reasons for their selection.

16. Review the estimates of the likely consequences of the recommended actions and the other assumptions of facts and values on which the recommendations are based, and estimate the risk of having made errors in establishing these premises. Where the consequences of having made particular errors would be serious, try to obtain additional validating information, or try to develop other methods for reducing that risk.

17. State the concluding recommendations in summary form.

18. Solicit competent critical reviews, and revise the analysis or the recommendations as necessary in the light of these critiques.

19. Communicate a summary analysis and the concluding recommendations to the "client."

The best route for getting from the identification of a problem to sound recommendations may not look anything like this at all. It might be approached by editing and revising the list. Some of these steps probably should be described in other ways, some can usefully be decomposed even further, and others can be added. Clear cyclical phases should be built into the scheme, with some stages of analysis reiterated until specified criteria are met. The whole procedure might ultimately be described in the form of a flow chart for a computer program, including detailed stop and go criteria at different stages. These should not be understood as programmatic rules, however, but more as a checklist to help assure that the right questions are posed at the right times.

Untried, the steps suggested here may seem trivial and obvious. That they are not obvious can be demonstrated by the fact that hardly anyone is likely to agree that this particular list is the correct one. It can be an interesting exercise for political science teachers to ask their students to suggest systematic procedures for arriving at recommendations for action dealing with real political problems, and then comparing and evaluating their answers. Even if the assignment is simplified by asking about only a limited class of political problems, the variety of suggestions that would be obtained is likely to be very great. If the suggestions were all equally good, the exercise would be trivial. The fact that a review of the answers will show that some are better than others will demonstrate that there is indeed something to be learned about policy analysis.

That the steps to be taken in policy analyses are not obvious can be appreciated by critically examining some of the common, plausible-sounding prescriptions. For example, it is frequently suggested that one must learn all about the problem, and know its full history, and must consider all action possibilities and must exhaustively describe and examine and evaluate all possibilities. To even try to do these things may be a serious mistake because the effort would waste the analyst's resources. The function of a good methodology is to indicate not only what questions should be asked, but also what questions should not be asked. It is much too easy for observers to insist that this or that kind of information is relevant and important. The analyst must, in effect, do a minor policy analysis to allocate his own time and energy, so that he can produce the best possible recommendations within the constraints inevitably imposed by his limited time and other resources.

It is not even obvious how a policy analysis should be begun. How should a political problem be described? Certainly its history is not, in itself, an adequate description of a current political problem. Is the essence a description of the values of the involved parties and of the incompatibilities among their values? Must one explain how these parties arrived at their particular preferences? What does one look for in a full and adequate description of a political problem? What constitutes background information, and what foreground?

The decision-making theorist's notion that policy-making begins with the task of selection from among a set of alternatives, as if a small number of discrete, fully defined, alternative recommendations for action always presented themselves simply upon the naming of a problem, is utterly naive. Perhaps it is because of their persistent focus on voting studies that they have failed to come to grips with the fact that, in most other

political situations, mutually exclusive options or outcomes are not very easy to distinguish. It is usually not obvious what action proposals should have their "political costs and benefits" assessed. Indeed, in practice, if the formulation of alternatives is thorough, the task of evaluation -- deciding which alternative is to be preferred -- often becomes trivial because the wise choices then become virtually self-evident. The list of policy analysis steps that has been outlined suggests the way in which other important tasks may overshadow the specific task of evaluation of alternatives.

Policy analysis procedures need not follow precise programs, any more than empirical research must be conducted by some rigid formula. An insistent demand for formal analytic schemes may in fact detract from the task of policy analysis, a task which requires very large doses of intuition, unformalized wisdom, and unscientific knowledge. Procedural outlines cannot substitute for these inputs, but they can guide their use. The argument here is simply that how policy analyses should be done is no more obvious than how empirical research should be done. There are guidelines yet to be written. It is essential that political scientists become thoroughly engaged in its practice if they are to advance the art of policy analysis.

Although it would certainly help, one does not have to have a fully articulated methodology in order to do policy analysis. Insistence on that would make the development of methodologies into an end in itself, and would defer the treatment of real problems. They have been put off enough. All one needs to start is a clear determination to work toward formulating sound, helpful recommendations for action dealing with the problem that is chosen for study. The worthwhileness of each intermediate step can then be estimated by the extent to which it is likely

to contribute toward that well-defined and fixed end. Intrude as they might, substitute objectives should not be allowed to divert the study. Deeper and deeper understanding, detailed histories, elaborate theories, methodologies, and other similar distractions, by themselves, do not meet problems. The best way to develop recommendations for action dealing with real political problems is to work at it, rather than at something else.

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